

# Sky-high AMBITION

Since a young age, USB MBA graduate Nombeko Mbava has looked at the bigger picture, seeing where and how she can contribute to the future. Now, working for the South African National Space Agency, she is doing just that. She spoke to **Cherice Smith** about past successes and future aspirations.

**M**BA alumnus Nombeko Mbava established her career ambitions when she was a Standard 9 learner at the Isilimela Comprehensive School in Langa, Cape Town. Over the years she has developed those ambitions into a flourishing career and now she is working as governance and planning manager for the South African National Space Agency (SANSA) in Pretoria.

“One of my favourite subjects at school was Economics. I also loved debates. In one particular debate in Standard 9, I argued my case about why South Africa needed an open economy so well that I received a Woolworths gift voucher as prize. That was my first taste of academic success. I decided then and there that I would like to be an economist so that I can advise on economic policies.”

As the top matric learner under the then Western Cape Department of Education and Training in 1991, Nombeko received a scholarship to study at Smith College in Massachusetts in the USA. In 1996, she graduated with a Bachelor in Economics and in 2006 she decided to empower herself with a business education. Nombeko completed her MBA at USB in 2008.

With an MBA and more than 10 years of experience in business analysis, project management and strategic planning in the petrochemical industry and retail environ-

ment under her belt, she now heads the Planning and Performance Management Unit at SANSA. Here she assists the SANSA CEO and SANSA board in preparing the organisation’s five-year strategic plan and the annual performance plan, among others.

For her, this job is intellectually stimulating. “This is a dream job for any MBA graduate. I have to think strategically, assess information analytically, work with diverse teams, have strong financial acumen, lead from the front and communicate eloquently. All of these were lessons I have learnt in the MBA classroom. Without that foundation, doing this job would have been a tall order.”

Did she ever think she would work for a space agency?



USB MBA graduate Nombeko Mbava with her late father, Davis Mbava, and mother, Eunice Mbava, at her graduation in 2009.

“Not in my wildest dreams,” she answers convincingly. “The beauty of an MBA degree is the fact that management theory is applicable in any environment. An MBA graduate can manage practically any type of enterprise. The MBA opened previously unlikely doors for me,” she explains.

“The MBA has enabled me to have a holistic view and understanding of management as a discipline. This enables you to understand how all the management functions – such as HR, Finance, Marketing, and Strategy – are interconnected. The value of an MBA lies in gaining an amazing amount of business knowledge that will span a lifetime.”

Two things drive Nombeko in her work: vision and opportunity. “Being part of an organisation that has a clear vision as well as visionary leadership excites me. If you ask me: Does SANSA have a clear vision that engages my heart and mind? Does being part of this organisation create pride in me? My answer is a resounding yes. I believe our vision of ensuring that space science and technology benefit South Africans, our environment and the economy through SANSA’s provision of space-based products and services, facilitating both research and development as well as human capital development in space science and technology. Achieving this vision will certainly contribute towards taking our country forward in terms of economic development, especially in the

**NOMBEKO MBAVA,**  
MBA alumnus  
and governance  
and planning  
manager for  
SANSA.



growth of our knowledge economy.

“With this end in mind I am able to remain engaged, to get up in the morning and show up in my work environment and have a sense of pride in working for SANSA because I am contributing to the future.”

**‘I believe in lifelong learning. There is always something new to learn.’**

Part of Nombeko’s success is her unique skill set. “I bring a package of value to my role. This includes strong planning and organising skills, excellent report writing skills and the ability to present complex information and disseminate it to a wider audience in a clear and simple format without losing its essence. I am a firm believer that your work output should speak for itself and therefore I bring my full commitment and contribution in any role that I undertake. This means producing quality work of the highest standards and always striving for excellence.”

Although Nombeko has had many career achievements, one will always stand out. “Certainly, the greatest moment of my life was when I walked across the floor as my name was called and I bowed in front of the

late benevolent Dr Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, the then chancellor of Stellenbosch University, as he awarded me my coveted MBA degree. In the packed auditorium were two special people who made that moment even more profound and without whose presence it would have been an empty accolade – my elderly parents. At the ages of 81 and 89 at the time, they sat there quietly absorbing this unique experience and I felt so proud to still have them there sharing in my success.”

As mother of a 13-year-old son and a baby boy, Nombeko says she has to manage herself well to focus on her career and family life, but she is already planning further studies. Her long-term career goal is to complete her doctorate. In ten years’ time she sees herself working as a policy advisor within government structures.

“In the course of my work I have become interested in programme and institutional evaluation to improve performance within the public sector. This is borne out by the fact that increasing fiscal and public accountability is required of government programmes and institutions. My research interest lies in seeking new knowledge for more informed methods and theories on programme and institutional evaluation to improve performance within the public sector. I am finalising my initial research proposal to enrol for a doctorate at USB. I believe in lifelong learning. There is always something new to learn.” 

**NOMBEKO'S CAREER TIPS**

 You must have the ability to work well with people from all walks of life. You get results through others and having good relationship-building skills generally gets the work done.

 Find work that is meaningful to you so that you can give fully of yourself. When you do, you will find it easy to be a diplomat for the company you work for.

 Do one or two things well and be known as an expert on these aspects of your work.

 When you leave a role it must be far more enriched than when you assumed it.

 Aim to produce work output of the highest standard – your work must speak for itself as it represents your personal brand.